"I'm, like, a very smart person"

On Self-Licensing and Perils of Reflection

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Abstract: Epistemic trespassing, science denial, refusal to guard against bias, mishandling higher-order evidence, and the development of vice are troubling intellectual behaviors. In this paper, I advance work done by psychologists on *moral self-licensing* to show how all of these behaviors can be explained in terms of a parallel phenomenon of *epistemic self-licensing*. The paper situates this discussion at the intersection of three major epistemological projects: epistemic explanation and intervention (the project of explaining troubling intellectual phenomena in the hopes of deriving ameliorative strategies), hostile epistemology (the study of how intellectual vulnerabilities might be exploited), and the promise of higher-order evidence (the hope that higher-order evidence leads to epistemic improvement). Analyzing epistemic licensing allows us to explain and offer modest interventions aimed at mitigating these behaviors, while illuminating exploitable vulnerabilities and tempering optimism about the promise of higher-order evidence.

Keywords: Moral and Epistemic Licensing; Disagreement; Science Denial; Epistemic Trespassing; Bias; Higher-Order Evidence; Hostile Epistemology; Complacency; Gaslighting

1. Introduction

This paper explores a phenomenon that provides a new explanation of many troubling intellectual behaviors, including epistemic trespassing, science denial, refusal to guard against bias, mishandling higher-order evidence, and the development of vice. Left unchecked, it's a vulnerability exploitable by forces aiming to manipulate people's minds

using a method mirroring gaslighting. Studying it can help us appreciate that those who most need the benefits of higher-order evidence may be least likely to accept them. The phenomenon is a form of what psychologists call "self-licensing."

Donna wonders whether spending money on herself rather than donating to charity this month would be selfish. She reasons:

Not donating this month wouldn't be selfish. I'm a generous person. I donated to charity last month and the month before that. I'll buy myself something nice.

Donna cites her personal qualities to justify conduct that could reflect poorly on her. She may worry about how *others* will perceive her behavior or about whether she can escape *self-criticism*. Either way, inquiring into what her past behavior indicates about who she is leaves her feeling like she can spend money on herself rather than charity with a clear conscience. Donna has engaged in self-licensing.

Psychological work on self-licensing focuses on practical cases like this, but I want to direct our attention to the possibility of *epistemic self-licensing*. Early on in his presidency, the 45th US president infamously decided against receiving daily intelligence briefings. How did he justify this and many other troubling decisions? By citing his alleged intellectual qualities: "I'm, like, a very smart person," "I'm a very stable genius," and "I have a very good brain." This looks like an epistemic analogue of the previous case. He cites his purported intellectual credentials (being smart) to license questionable intellectual conduct (opting for ignorance). Since this president is a living anomaly, we should find other examples of epistemic self-licensing if we're going to take it seriously. I will argue that self-licensing underlies a range of worrisome intellectual phenomena.

This paper has three main goals. First, I clarify self-licensing. While psychologists have done interesting empirical work on *moral* licensing, some of their conceptual work seems muddled. I aim to clarify self-licensing in general and epistemic self-licensing in particular.[2] Second, I develop a framework for evaluating licensing. Unsurprisingly, psychologists have not attempted to answer questions about the acceptability of licensing. I aim to address this lacuna. Self-licensing is not necessarily problematic, but often it is. The framework I develop will help draw these distinctions. Third, I show how my analysis of self-licensing allows us to explain and identify potential interventions into a range of troubling intellectual behaviors while also casting doubt on what I call "the promise of higher-order evidence."

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[2] I have discussed epistemic self-licensing on the periphery of other work (DiPaolo 2020a, 2021). Here it takes center stage.

Let me briefly clarify these goals. First, amid the replication crisis I think placing significant argumentative weight on recent psychological findings absent evidence of robustness is irresponsible. Aware of replication problems, psychologists have noted that moral licensing effects are reliable (Effron & Conway 2015). Still, we must be cautious. While cases of moral and epistemic licensing likely exist, this paper doesn't rely on this claim. If necessary, we can understand the project as trying to articulate a possible phenomenon, exploring its implications, and stating conditions under which it would be criticizable.

Second, this project sometimes encounters the following evidentialist objection.

Rationality requires you to believe what your evidence supports. Your beliefs are criticizable exactly when and to the extent that you're not believing what your evidence supports. There's nothing more to say.

Granted: beliefs are criticizable when they don't adequately reflect evidence. But claiming that there's nothing more to say is absurd. Such a view lacks structure. It treats the epistemic normativity of licensing the same way it treats perception, memory, and testimony: believe what your evidence supports. However, distinct sources should be treated differently. Perception, memory, and testimony may all lead us astray in different ways. For the purpose of guiding belief, we must identify these different sources of error. That is a central task here. In contrast to the evidentialist view, I examine licensing at a sharper resolution, identifying potential licensing errors. Contrast these two directives: "Make sure you pack everything you need" and "Don't forget to pack your toothbrush." Once you've said the first, saying the second may seem redundant. But by identifying a way the listener might fail to follow the first directive, the second directive can actually improve compliance with the first. We imperfect believers must track ways we fail to meet epistemic standards and do our best to avoid those traps. Analyzing licensing may help us avoid licensing errors.

Finally, I want to briefly preview the point I will make about higher-order evidence. Evidence about our epistemic state – including evidence about what we should believe, about what our evidence supports, about our intellectual virtues, vices, accomplishments, and failures – interests many of us because it promises to provide an antidote to our fallibility. No one has done more than David Christensen to sing the praises of higher-order evidence (esp. 2007, 2010). Such evidence, he argues, is an indispensable epistemic tool we ought to seek out for the sake of self-improvement. In recent years, largely due to Christensen's groundbreaking work, work on higher-order evidence has taken up puzzles

about how to rationally respond to *misleading* higher-order evidence.[3] These two strands of study are related. Resolving these puzzles is one way of interrogating whether higher-order evidence lives up to its promise. Those who deny the rational significance of misleading higher-order evidence tend to downplay its promise (Lasonen-Aarnio 2014; Titelbaum 2015). Those intent on vindicating its promise tend to defend, sometimes by going to great lengths, misleading higher-order evidence's rational significance (Christensen 2010, 2013; DiPaolo 2019). Rather than grappling with puzzles surrounding misleading higher-order evidence, I take a different tack here. Even if all of these puzzles get resolved in favor of higher-order evidence's ameliorative promise, studying self-licensing reveals that we must *still* temper our optimism about the promise of even *veridical* higher-order evidence. A potential consequence of self-licensing error, including error based in veridical higher-order evidence, is intellectual complacency and mishandling higher-order evidence. By inoculating those who have succumbed to licensing errors against the force of corrective higher-order evidence, these errors can lead to the very dogmatism that we might have hoped higher-order evidence would correct.

To see what I have in mind, imagine seeking a medical solution to a physical ailment. After listening carefully to your symptoms, your doctor enthusiastically informs you: "I've got the antidote! A new drug can help with all of those symptoms." Feeling relieved, you thank her and ask when the treatment begins. "Well, first we must wait for your symptoms to subside. This drug only improves the condition when it's no longer a problem." This would be absurd. An antidote that only works in the absence of the condition it treats is no antidote at all. Similarly, higher-order evidence is no antidote to fallibility if it only works in its absence. Its effectiveness must be measured against the conditions in which it will actually be administered. Though veridical higher-order evidence *can* lead to improvement, we cannot assume that it is an indispensable tool that we should always seek out. Acquiring veridical higher-order evidence comes with unique risks. The very reasons we need it – our fallibility, our susceptibility to poor reflection and mishandling our evidence, our ignorance and unreliability about ourselves and our predicaments – not only reduce its effectiveness but also sometimes make *lacking* it preferable to *having* it. Or, in any case, I will argue that this is what our study of self-licensing demonstrates.

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[3] See, for example, Christensen 2013, Greco 2014, Lasonen-Aarnio 2014, Horowitz 2014, Sliwa & Horowitz 2015, Titelbaum 2015, Weatherson 2019, and the papers in Skipper & Steglich-Petersen 2019. For an excellent overview of this literature, see Whiting 2020.

Here's the plan. First, I begin by analyzing licensing (§2). From this analysis, I derive an explanation of when licensing goes right and wrong, identifying four potential licensing errors (§3). Next, I show how epistemic self-licensing explains an apparently diverse range of troubling phenomena (§4). Then, I connect this discussion with concerns about manipulation and higher-order evidence (§5). Finally, I conclude.

2. Licensing as Switch

What is self-licensing? The empirical literature explains and illustrates the notion in many ways. Sometimes psychologists explain it with the slogan "virtuous behavior frees people to act less-than-virtuously" (Effron & Conway 2015). Sometimes by saying, "The defining experience of having license is the perception that one's behavioral history, social context, or category membership permit one to legitimately do or say something that otherwise would discredit the self" (Miller & Effron 2010: 116). As Merrit et. al. (2010: 344) write, "When people are confident their past behavior demonstrates compassion, generosity, or a lack of prejudice, they are more likely to act in morally dubious ways without fear of feeling heartless, selfish, or bigoted." Studies suggest that having opportunities to choose environmentally friendly products can increase subsequent dishonesty, agreeing to provide help can reduce charitable giving, and endorsing a Black politician can increase willingness to favor White people over Black people in certain decisions (Effron & Conway 2015).

These descriptions differ over several factors. What does the license *do*? It frees, makes more likely, permits, increases, and/or reduces certain behaviors or feelings. Which behaviors? Less than virtuous, morally dubious, or potentially discrediting ones. Which feelings? Mostly fear: fear of feeling or appearing heartless, selfish, bigoted, or discredited. Rather than attempting to untangle all of this, I focus selectively on what's needed to identify the phenomenon I'm after.

Start with a helpful distinction between *credits* and *credentials* (Monin & Miller 2001). Considering not donating to charity this month, Donna might say to herself, "I just made a generous donation last month. I've earned some selfishness this month." Or she might say instead, as she did in the opening example, "I just made a generous donation last month. Spending money on myself this month rather than donating isn't selfish." These two types of self-licensing are, respectively, credit-based and credential-based. They differ over how the agent interprets current behavior in light of past behavior. In the first case, Donna accepts that not donating would be selfish, but thinks her past donation earned her "selfish credits" she can cash in this month. In the second case, however, she conceives of not

donating as unselfish; her past behavior evinces her generosity. Rather than entitling a transgression, her past good deeds clarify that her subsequent behavior is no transgression at all. Credentials – here: her past behavior – serve as a lens through which she interprets and disambiguates her behavior in line with those credentials (Monin & Miller 2001: 349). I focus on credential-based licensing.

We should distinguish credential-based licensing from two nearby phenomena. First, people often do things they recognize as problematic because they know their credentials will shield them from being judged too harshly for these behaviors. But this doesn't count as self-licensing because the agents acknowledge that the relevant behaviors are negative. Second, credential-based self-licensing must be distinguished from rationalization. Rationalization occurs when one's professed reasons are not the true reasons for which one acts or believes; having reasons readily accessible that *would* or *might* justify one's behaviors, one cites those reasons even though one is not *actually motivated* by those reasons. In practice, telling whether someone is rationalizing or self-licensing is difficult; indeed, extended cases may begin as self-licensed and end up as rationalizations. Conceptually, however, they must be distinguished.

When self-licensing, an agent does something because she believes her credentials license that behavior. The three central elements are: the licensing relation, credentials, and the licensed behavior. I'll comment on each.

Self-licensing involves a contrastive evaluation of behaviors. Recall, psychologists characterize self-licensing by saying a person's credentials permit one to legitimately do something that would *otherwise* discredit the self. Telling jokes about a certain race can be racist, whereas being a member of that race, one might think, makes telling such jokes non-racist. A person's credentials seem to "switch" the evaluation of the relevant behavior from negative to (sufficiently) non-negative. The credentials version of the charity example looks the same. Whereas never donating to charity might make spending money on herself selfish, having donated last month, Donna thinks, makes this unselfish. Thus, I propose analyzing the licensing relation in terms of "switching":

> **Licensing Relation**: Credential C licenses behavior B if and only if having C switches B from being X (negative evaluation) to being Y (sufficiently non-negative evaluation).[4]

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[4] Wouldn't Donna be self-licensing even if she decided not to donate while thinking this decision was selfish but *less* selfish in light of her past behavior? If so, isn't the idea that credentials *switch* evaluations mistaken? Two responses come to mind. First, perhaps this isn't a problem for the account because Donna's behavior doesn't count as self-licensing, since she doesn't see herself as having license to perform the behavior. Second, perhaps it *is* self-licensing

"Switching" is a contrastive difference-making relation. Having credentials *makes* certain behaviors (sufficiently) non-negative rather than negative: all else equal, in virtue of having C, your behavior is Y. Like many other difference-making relations, though, switching is non-monotonic: even if having certain credentials switches the behavior from negative to non-negative, adding other factors to the equation, while keeping those credentials in place, can reverse the switch. Being the *parent* of, rather than a stranger to, a child makes certain actions towards that child permissible. Being an *abusive parent* might make those same behaviors impermissible.

We should understand the negative/non-negative evaluation components broadly. Sometimes having credentials switches a behavior from being impermissible to permissible. Other times, the evaluations will be thicker. Having certain credentials might switch a joke from being racist to non-racist, or switch a decision from selfish to unselfish. We should leave open what kinds of evaluations can figure in licensing, leaving those questions for when we're assessing particular instances of it.

Following psychologists, we should also understand credentials broadly. A person's credentials include their behavioral history, social context (including relationships), mental state, and category membership. For any given person, not all of these factors will be positive. But any of those factors can constitute someone's positive credentials. Referring to certain qualities, especially a person's category membership like their race, as "credentials" may sound odd. But this is a theoretical term, similar in meaning to the ordinary language use of the term but ultimately distinct from it. In the context of licensing, certain qualities possessed by a person actually do, or merely might be thought to, make a difference to the evaluative status of their behavior. Whatever those qualities happen to be, for the sake of having a single term that encompasses all of them, call them credentials.

The third central element in self-licensing is the licensed behavior. An agent might self-license in deliberative settings. Deciding whether to ϕ, he is unsure whether it's permissible. After consulting his credentials and deciding ϕing is permissible, he ϕs. An agent might also self-license in defensive settings. In response to criticism, from others or from herself, she may decide that her credentials make her behavior uncriticizable. She may then continue to engage in this behavior, or do it again in the future, for this reason. A difference between deliberative and defensive self-licensing concerns the behavior's

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because Donna thinks her past behavior makes not donating *sufficiently* unselfish. In that case, the switch idea applies because, by Donna's lights, her credentials place not donating above a certain unselfishness threshold. Either way, this objection doesn't pose a problem for analyzing the licensing relation in terms of switching.

origin. In deliberative cases, self-licensing is an initial cause of behavior. In defensive cases, self-licensing can perpetuate and maintain behaviors even if it did not initially cause them. Thus, self-licensing can influence whether a person begins behavior, continues behavior, or would behave similarly again.

Combining all of this, here is how I propose to understand self-licensing:

Self-Licensing: A self-licenses ϕing if and only if A ϕs because A believes her credentials C license ϕing (i.e., C switches ϕing from being X (negative) to being Y (sufficiently non-negative).[5]

A final note: the "because" signals partial, not complete, explanation; the belief that one's credentials switch the evaluation usually only partly explains why the person ϕs.[6]

Before moving on, I'll forestall an objection. It's tempting to object that licensing-talk simply renames something we already talk about. If a person's credentials include all factors about her situation, then 'licensing' is just another word for 'justifying'. And if justifying behavior by citing its circumstantial features is licensing that behavior, then licensing just is justifying and this rebranding is unnecessary. Plenty of philosophical work already studies normative justification.

However, not all factors in a person's situation are among their credentials and justifying behavior by indicating its circumstantial features is not equivalent to licensing. I believe we self-license, but often our decisions or their defenses are independent of our credentials. Suppose a woman falls off her wheelchair as you pass her on the sidewalk: though we can imagine certain complex social situations where you stop and think about who you are, what your behavioral history is, what social categories you're a member of, surely in the most mundane case you just go and help her. Not because of your credentials, but because she needs help. Cases like this are ubiquitous. Our behavior is often other-oriented rather than self-oriented, and even when it is self-oriented, it is often related to

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[5] I'm not claiming that a person must believe *in these terms* that her credentials switch the evaluative status of her behavior. This analysis articulates, in terms I find helpful for the sake of further analysis, evaluation, and guidance what the underlying thought must be like, implicit thought it may be.

[6] We can extend the analysis of self-licensing to "other-licensing," as when we take others' credentials to switch the evaluative status of their behaviors.

Other-Licensing: B other-licenses A's ϕing if and only if B judges A's ϕing as Y (non-negative) rather than X (negative) because B believes A's credentials C license A's ϕing (i.e., switch A's ϕing from being X to being Y).

Other-licensing is susceptible to similar mistakes as self-licensing, but I cannot pursue these connections here.

self-interest not credentials. Licensing may be a form of justification, but they are logically distinct.

3. Good and Bad Licensing

Formally, nothing is wrong with self-licensing. Far from cause for comfort, however, this provides all the more reason to clarify its normative structure. Knowing licensing can be unproblematic, agents might be seduced into thinking their own problematic licensing reasoning is error-free. We need to know when licensing goes right and wrong. "Right" and "wrong" here refer to accuracy and error, rather than justification and rationality. Saying licensing goes right does not imply that all things considered the licensed behavior was justified, only that a licensing error was not made. I'm looking for answers to the question: Which errors must we watch out for?

Last section's analysis will help. Self-licensing occurs when agents ϕ because they believe their credentials switch ϕing from being negative to non-negative. Imagine a father giving a bath to his young daughter who wants him to take a video of her singing a song. Deliberating about its appropriateness, he might think: "Obviously, no stranger should take that video, but you're her dad. It's fine." Suppose this is an instance of self-licensing: he takes the video because he believes being her dad makes it okay. Has he made an error?

Saying the dad performs the action "because he believes being her dad makes it okay" sounds like he has only one belief when really he has two. He believes (i) that he possesses certain credentials (he's her dad) and (ii) that the switch relation holds (being her dad makes it acceptable). If he wasn't really her dad or being her dad doesn't make his behavior acceptable, then his self-licensing would be based in error. From these considerations, we can derive one way self-licensing goes right and three ways it goes wrong. It goes right when (i) the person has the credentials they think they have and (ii) the switch relation they think holds actually does hold. It goes wrong when (i) or (ii) is false: if they don't have those credentials or the switch relation doesn't hold.

	Person has credentials	Person doesn't have credentials
Switch relation holds	OK	Error
Switch relation doesn't hold	Error	Error

If this is correct, assessing self-licensing requires answering two main questions. Does the agent have the credentials they think they have? Does having those credentials license their behavior?

Approaching licensing via these questions makes identifying licensing errors easier. Although many errors are possible, I restrict my focus to four divided between two categories, credential errors and switch errors.

Credential Errors

1. Credential Confusion
2. Credential Deficiency

Switch Errors

3. Irrelevance
4. Overextension

Credential errors involve agents thinking they have certain credentials they actually lack. Credential Confusion occurs when agents confuse one set of credentials they possess for a set they lack. The familiar "I have a Black friend" is often taken to evince the speaker's lack of prejudice. But, of course, having a friend from a particular racial or ethnic group is different from harboring no prejudice against that group or others. Insofar as this person actually *is* prejudiced she is suffering from Credential Confusion. Credential Deficiency occurs when agents believe they have credentials they actually lack, but not because they confuse those credentials for nearby credentials. They clearly conceive of the credentials, but they believe they have them when they simply lack them. For instance, perhaps an agent falsely believes she is a member of a particular marginalized group because family members told her this when she was young. She knows what the credentials are. She's mistaken about whether she has them.

Agents who mistakenly think having certain credentials switches the evaluative status of their behavior have made a switch error. Switch errors can be made even when agents perfectly conceive of their credentials. Irrelevance errors occur when agents think, of credentials that actually bear no relevance to the evaluative status of their behavior, that they not only are relevant but also switch this status. Overextension errors occur when agents correctly think their credentials switch the evaluative status of certain behaviors in a particular domain but then overextend the license to behaviors outside that domain. Imagine an Italian comedian telling derogatory jokes about Italians and about Black people. If he's told both jokes because he thinks being Italian makes doing so okay, he's made the Overextension error. Being Italian may make a difference to the evaluative status of jokes within a certain domain without making that difference to jokes in others.

With this list of licensing errors in hand, recall the evidentialist objection to the project of assessing licensing reasoning: the only question that must be asked when assessing reasoning, including licensing, is whether agents are proportioning their beliefs to their

evidence. My complaint against this approach is that it is structureless and offers no guidance. Uncovering more structure is necessary for the sake of guiding and evaluating licensing. Analyzing licensing has clearly revealed licensing errors, better positioning us to interrogate our own and others' licensing reasoning. Do you really have the credentials you think you do? Are you confusing your credentials for other, irrelevant credentials? Do your credentials actually license your behavior? Are you overextending your credentials? These second-personal questions have first-personal and third-personal analogues that individuals must ask when assessing licensing. We've come a long way in providing guidance from the overly general, structureless question: "Does your evidence support your beliefs?" Furthermore, since they were derived from the analysis of licensing advanced in the last section, that analysis has borne fruit.

4. Epistemic Licensing

Only moral licensing – licensing from moral credentials to moral evaluations – is discussed in the empirical literature. This section shifts our attention to epistemic licensing, where credentials, behaviors, and evaluations are epistemic or intellectual in nature. Certain troubling intellectual behaviors can be explained by self-licensing errors. The fact that all of these apparently diverse behaviors can be explained this way provides strong reason to include the notion of epistemic self-licensing into our repertoire of critical concepts.

It is unsurprising that self-licensing occurs in the epistemic realm. As we often condition epistemic evaluations on agents' credentials, it makes sense for agents to internalize the structure of these evaluations and base their own behaviors on them. Consider how epistemologists evaluate responses to disagreement. According to many views, disputants should first search their relative credentials for asymmetries. Are you more expert than your disputant? Do you have greater cognitive abilities or intellectual virtues? Most interesting philosophical work on disagreement concerns *peer* disagreement precisely because arriving at reasonable verdicts is easier when credential asymmetries exist between disputants. All else equal, epistemic superiors can rationally maintain their beliefs in light of disagreement with their inferiors. If they do this *because* they realize they possess these credentials, they are arguably self-licensing appropriately. Corroboration, the flip side of disagreement, provides another example of appropriate epistemic self-licensing. Hearing that several independent and reliable sources endorse a proposition I tentatively accept might lead me to think I've got a certain credential: I think the same thing as these independent and reliable sources. If I go ahead and fully adopt this belief on this basis, such

self-licensing seems appropriate. When epistemic superiors maintain their beliefs when disagreeing with inferiors *because* of this asymmetry, or when someone becomes more confident *because* of reliable and independent corroboration, appropriate self-licensing is taking place in the epistemic realm. Thus, epistemic self-licensing is possible and possibly legitimate.

Erroneous epistemic self-licensing, however, will be my focus. Such self-licensing explains instances of epistemic trespassing, science denial, refusal to guard against bias, concluding inquiry prematurely, and conspiracy theorizing. In the next section, I also connect these explanations to manipulation, mishandling higher-order evidence, and the development of vice.

Epistemic Trespassing. Epistemic trespassing occurs when someone with expertise in one domain passes judgment outside their domain of expertise (Ballantyne 2019). Why does epistemic trespassing occur? No doubt conscious disregard for the limits of one's expertise or for the well-being of listeners explains some trespassing; experts can make good money trespassing as corporate shills. But surely not all trespassing is attributable to unsavory motives or even awareness of wrong-doing. Often self-licensing errors explain trespassing.

Consider the timely case of Scott Atlas, a medical doctor specializing in radiology, trained at the University of Chicago and employed at Stanford University Medical Center from 1998-2012. Yet, in 2020, without expertise in epidemiology or viral diseases, Atlas acted as a leading advisor on the US coronavirus task force insisting that letting the virus spread in the public to build herd immunity within the population was the proper course of action. What would lead Atlas to make these claims beyond his expertise? What leads thinkers to trespass? Licensing errors. While representing yourself as an expert outside your expertise is generally inappropriate, the unaware epistemic trespasser fails to realize he's doing this: "I can legitimately pass judgment about epidemiological matters. I'm a medical doctor [or I'm a scientist]." This looks like erroneous self-licensing. Without direct access to people's thinking, knowing *which* error a person has made in a particular case will be difficult. Perhaps credential confusion: Atlas believes being a medical doctor gives him epidemiological expertise. Or perhaps overextension: he recognizes the distinction between these two areas, knows where he stands, but believes his own expertise makes asserting beyond medicine acceptable. Or perhaps a combination. In any case, licensing error can explain epistemic trespassing. An expert in one area wrongly thinks his expertise extends to another area or makes passing judgment there acceptable. These are licensing errors.

Science Denial. Climate scientists know the Earth is warming, they know large increases in greenhouse gases contribute to Earth's warming, and they confidently attribute much of Earth's warming to human emissions of greenhouse gases. Yet, many laypeople and some prominent scientists doubt all this. Licensing errors can explain some science denial.

First consider the scientists. The prominent scientists leading the campaign of doubt on climate science are scientists, but not *climate* scientists (Oreskes & Conway 2010). To outsiders unfamiliar with how specialized science is, drawing this distinction may seem silly. But science *is* specialized. Scientific experts are not expert on all of science. These scientists are arguably guilty of epistemic trespassing. We have just seen how licensing errors can explain some trespassing.

The second way licensing errors enter the science denial picture isn't restricted to scientists. During a 2011 presidential debate, then governor Rick Perry defended his doubt about climate change by invoking Galileo, an intellectual maverick who purportedly stood up against scientific consensus. Likening himself to Galileo seems to have given Perry the confidence to think his own stance against scientific consensus wasn't epistemically irresponsible. This exemplifies a more general strategy science deniers employ: they treat their lack of scientific training as an intellectual virtue (Torcello 2016: 22). This looks like fertile ground for licensing errors. People can twist their lack of training and experience into a credential that licenses the doubting of science. This isn't limited to non-experts.[7] Although scientists have an intellectual advantage over non-scientists, scientists who lack climate science expertise can view their lack of climate science training just as non-scientists view their lack of scientific training, as a virtue not a vice that licenses doubting scientific consensus.

We can derive a general warning about licensing from these examples. Where intellectual expertise bears on the appropriateness of epistemic behavior, licensing errors will creep in. Non-experts might mistakenly see their lack of expertise as a positive credential that licenses opposition to expert consensus. Experts in one domain might wrongly think their expertise extends to another. Ballantyne (2019) has drawn our attention to epistemic trespassing, yet in his otherwise thorough investigation, he sets the "deeper causes" of trespassing aside (370). The hypothesis that some epistemic trespassing can be

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[7] Neither is it limited to science. It's increasingly common for those running for political office to cite their *lack* of political experience as an asset rather than a deficit. Thanks to Hilary Kornblith for reminding me of this sort of example.

attributed to epistemic licensing errors deserves serious investigation. Why might these people pass judgment in fields where they lack competence or expertise? Because they wrongly think their expertise extends to these fields, or their lack of expertise actually licenses their behavior. In other words, because they've succumbed to licensing error.

Bias and Objectivity. There are things you should avoid doing if you're "biased" that might be acceptable if you can be "objective." A biased judge should recuse herself from the case. A person with implicit bias should deprive himself of identifying information when participating on a hiring committee. We encourage people to reflect on whether they can be objective and to act accordingly. Unfortunately, bias and objectivity are unclear and vague notions. Whatever else *being objective* is, it's a credential if you've got it that licenses behaviors that would otherwise be criticizable. This combination – being obscure and a licensing credential – lends itself to licensing errors. People might cite their own alleged objectivity to license questionable conduct in many kinds of cases. Let me discuss a few.

A scientist trained to "objectively" evaluate evidence might think his training has made him immune to implicit and explicit bias. Suppose such a scientist is about to embark upon a project where implicit bias tends to manifest, like hiring. While knowing that depriving oneself of identifying information is among the most effective ways to combat implicit bias, he decides against opting for ignorance because he believes his training makes him unbiased. But having been trained to evaluate evidence according to scientific canons is distinct from being unbiased. If, like the rest of us, this scientist isn't totally free from bias, he's guilty of credential confusion: he's confused a credential he has (having been trained to evaluate evidence in certain ways) for one he lacks (being unbiased). Or consider a variant where the scientist reasons as follows: "I have never had a consciously biased thought in my life! I can skip all this anonymizing." Even if he's truly never had consciously biased thoughts, he's still made a licensing mistake, a switch error rather than a credential error. Now the scientist perfectly conceives of his credentials, but he wrongly assumes his lack of conscious bias switches not opting for ignorance from being epistemically irresponsible to being not irresponsible.

We should highlight the realistic downstream effects of such self-licensing. Berenstain (2018) argues that one cause of gender disparities in the field of philosophy can be traced to how philosophers' overconfidence in their own objectivity leads them to refuse

to take steps to mitigate their bias.[8] As this would be problematic self-licensing, if Berenstain is correct that the gender disparity in philosophy can be partly attributed to this refusal by philosophers to mitigate their bias, it follows that problematic self-licensing not only explains some refusal to guard against bias but also partly explains the gender disparity in philosophy.

Examining quantitative measurement and algorithmic bias allows us to see another pressing set of examples involving abuse of ostensible objectivity. Baldly put, it's easy to confuse using numbers with being objective (Merry 2016, O'Neil 2017). As Cathy O'Neil (2017) documents in her book *Weapons of Math Destruction*, opaque algorithms and machine learning programs used in hiring decisions, assessment of loan applications, policing, and criminal justice are marketed as "fair and objective" and their verdicts are treated by some as being beyond dispute because they don't involve "prejudiced humans digging through reams of paper, just machines processing cold numbers" (3). The idea is that because these programs spit out their verdicts solely on the basis of objective numerical calculations those verdicts themselves must be objective. Now imagine someone licensing intellectual behavior on this basis: "I'm being objective by relying solely on the verdicts of these programs to inform my judgment, so I can trust that judgment." This is a licensing error. Using machine learning programs and algorithms to analyze data does not make their outputs objective in any interesting sense bearing on whether people are being objective in trusting judgments based in these outputs. Bias can influence these outputs in many ways, including via direct manipulation by malicious agents, biased or unbalanced training data, problematic labeling in training data, and positive feedback loops. While masquerading as fully objective, these outputs result from the workings of programs designed by fallible humans using data shaped by human choices that encodes societal bias.[9]

Why might someone fail to take appropriate precautions to guard against their own bias? Why might someone place excessive trust in the outputs of machine learning programs? Because they've made licensing errors: they think they have certain credentials that license those behaviors, while being mistaken on one or both counts.

Concluding Inquiry. There are different senses of "concluding inquiry." Practically, scientists conclude inquiry when they publish their results after deciding against running further experiments. But, intellectually, these scientists have kept inquiry open if

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[8] Much like our scientist example. Though this example was devised before I first encountered Berenstain's fascinating paper, I think my discussion makes clear that Berenstain and I are triangulating on the same phenomenon.
[9] For a recent, wide-ranging discussion of related issues, see Kahneman et al. 2021.

they still ponder the questions driving their research, even if they have decided to quit running experiments. You conclude inquiry in this intellectual sense when you are not seriously considering challenges to your position because you think you have reached answers to your driving questions. When is concluding inquiry appropriate? Hard question. Staunch empiricists might say never, as some new piece of information could always overturn your conclusions. Less staunch empiricists might say we can close inquiry if we have strong reason to believe acquiring new evidence would not make a difference to conclusions reached. Other answers are possible too.[10] Whatever the correct account, we must be wary of concluding inquiry prematurely. Consider a young adult who accepts certain religious or moral tenets because her parents raised her to believe them. Many of my students have thought this fact makes having concluded inquiry appropriate. Or consider the convert who believes the thinking that resulted in his conversion makes concluding inquiry appropriate for him. Or consider the person who does the most cursory internet search to answer an exceedingly complex question. Verdicts about these cases may be less evident than others. Still, if you find this behavior problematic, licensing errors might be to blame. My parents told me so, I've already thought about this, I googled it: depending on the question, having these credentials often won't license concluding inquiry. When inquiry is prematurely concluded on the basis of these credentials, licensing error is to blame.

Conspiracy Theorizing. Finally, some conspiracy theorizing is probably sustained by self-licensing error, perhaps often including doses of all the licensing errors so-far discussed in this section. Instead of rehashing these details, I want to briefly show how the conspiracy theorist's invocation of the familiar "I do my own research" – along with the range of similar alleged qualifications – as a justification for his nonconformism can reasonably be interpreted as licensing error. First, doing one's own research is not necessarily a credential, no matter how widespread the "think for yourself"-credo is in popular discourse. If doing one's research amounts to first *googling it* and then believing whatever one finds that fits with one's preconceived notions, this is no credential and in this case the conspiracy theorist suffers from credential confusion. But even if one has happened upon credible sources, forming and maintaining one's own opinion in the face of disagreement with those who likely have more information and more skill at assessing that information because one did one's own research does not make this behavior intellectually

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[10] Common answers in the epistemological literature include "when you know" or "when you understand." For discussion, see, e.g., Kelp 2011, Kvanvig 2011, Rysiew 2012, and Hannon 2019.

responsible or acceptable. In this case, the conspiracy theorist may be making a switch error.

In sum: Epistemic trespassing, science denial, refusal to guard against bias, overestimation of one's objectivity, prematurely concluding inquiry, and conspiracy theorizing are all examples of troubling intellectual behavior. Self-licensing error cannot explain all instances of these behaviors. Epistemic insouciance – a casual or wanton indifference to epistemic considerations (Cassam 2019: 79) – no doubt explains some. Other instances may require other explanations. But a common thread runs through these behaviors. Many of our offenders are reflective, epistemically conscientious people. It's odd or somewhat surprising that people manifestly capable of behaving in epistemically virtuous ways engage in such epistemically questionable conduct. Analyzing these examples as instances of self-licensing helps us explain *this* aspect of these cases. It helps us see why intellectually good people might do bad things. Reflective individuals engage in this problematic conduct *because* they reflect: they ask themselves who they are, what they have accomplished, what credentials they have, and what all of this implies about their behavior. Licensing error, in all its worrisome manifestations, is a risk of reflection.

5. Higher-Order Evidence & Self-Licensing

This section further elaborates on these risks of reflection. The upshot is that unchecked self-licensing can prevent higher-order evidence from improving self-licensers' epistemic positions and creates exploitable vulnerabilities in their minds. Indeed, self-licensing from information provided by veridical, positive higher-order evidence can degrade one's epistemic position, leading one to develop and sustain vice. Thus, enabling higher-order evidence to achieve its promise of epistemic improvement without leading to epistemic decline requires avoiding the traps associated with these risks.

5.1 Higher-Order Evidence & Intellectual Decline

Directing our attention to a series of questions aimed at self-interrogation derived from our analysis of self-licensing can be helpful even if it will not prevent or eradicate all licensing errors. This hopeful attitude is based on the thought that gaining a more accurate representation of one's epistemic situation by engaging in critical self-reflection leads to epistemic improvement. That same thought drives the hopeful attitude towards the promise of higher-order evidence, that acquiring such evidence leads to self-correction and epistemic improvement. Now, it's undeniable that acquiring higher-order evidence *can*

have this effect. The worry I will develop in light of our examination of self-licensing, however, is that acquiring higher-order evidence can also have the opposite effect of leading its recipients into *incognizant epistemic decline*, a worsening or worsened epistemic state of which the agent is unaware.

This worry differs from other worries about higher-order evidence discussed in the literature. First, it is not about *misleading* higher-order evidence; completely accurate, veridical higher-order evidence can cause epistemic decline. Second, because of this, denying the epistemic significance of misleading higher-order evidence does not deflate the worry. Anyone who thinks beliefs about our epistemic state should be responsive to *any* higher-order evidence must grapple with this worry. Third, incognizant epistemic decline differs from the decline associated with Christensen's (2010) toxicity worry, that acquiring misleading higher-order evidence forces agents to violate epistemic ideals. Agents who acquire higher-order evidence are not *bound* to experience incognizant epistemic decline. My worry is unabashedly contingent, but no less worrisome for being so since whether agents experience it requires empirical investigation. This kind of epistemic decline can sneak up on you. Everyone who engages in the relevant sort of reflection is at risk. Finally, my worry begins with higher-order evidence that favors positive rather than negative assessments of one's epistemic state or history. Although the worry relates to negative higher-order evidence about agents' intellectual mishaps or vices, the sort of evidence from which it begins is evidence about agents' intellectual successes and virtues.

To orient the discussion, I will begin with a case of incognizant *moral* decline produced by self-licensing error. Unchecked self-licensing errors can change reflective, morally motivated, even virtuous agents into misbehaving agents filled with incaution and complacency blissfully unaware of their degradation. Consider:

> ENVIRONMENTALIST-EV: Ev cares deeply about the environment and wants to do her part to care for it. So, a year ago, she committed to improving her environmental impact by always recycling paper at the office and giving up her use of plastic straws. After work one day while shopping for groceries, she listens to a podcast about the threat of climate change. (Staying informed about environmental issues really matters to her!) The podcast concludes as she packs the beef she'll be cooking for dinner on her newly installed gas grill into the back of the Hummer she purchased last month with money gained from the stocks she cleverly invested in the fossil fuel industry six months ago, and she thinks to herself, "I feel really good about doing my part for the environment over this last year! I'm glad I gave up plastic straws! Who needs 'em?!" To turn this into an explicit case of self-licensing: imagine Ev hears on the podcast how air travel negatively affects the environment and yet licenses her annual trip to the Bahamas by directing her attention to the environmental-friendly credentials she's developed this past year: "Every day this year I have made decisions that help the environment! Booking

this trip is fine." To make it an extreme case of self-licensing, imagine that Ev reasons like this at each misstep. "Every day this year I have made decisions that help the environment! Doing this [purchasing beef, installing a gas grill, buying the Hummer, investing in fossil fuels] is fine."

Clearly, Ev has made licensing errors many times over! Either she's confused her genuine credentials of taking (small) steps to help the environment with a credential she lacks, being environmentally conscious, or she's mistakenly thought that her minor efforts switch the status of her environment-harming behaviors to being acceptable. Either way, Ev's reflection on her good deeds has abetted her moral decline. Assuming that Ev isn't engaged in rationalization, her behavior and environmental impact would have been much better had she not taken her measly steps to improve her impact given how she used her awareness of those steps to license her poor decisions. But the culprit here isn't the good behavior: Ev *should* recycle and give up unnecessary plastics. Rather, her reflection is the problem. In light of her credentials, she's not worrying about her questionable conduct. She's giving herself a pass. She's resting content with her meager achievements. As a result, her behavior has become worse than it otherwise would have been.

What has happened to Ev? Reflecting on her good deeds has made her complacent. Complacency is constituted by an overestimate of one's credentials or their implications that results in excessive self-satisfaction; this in turn significantly reduces one's felt need to maintain or improve one's credentials which finally produces a problematic lack of appropriate action (cf. Kawall 2006: 345). Complacent people, Kawall writes:

> stop short; they rest content with their achievements or efforts, either failing to make any further efforts at all ("I've already done enough"), or only proceeding with inadequate efforts and actions.

This describes Ev. She thinks her good deeds are good enough. Feeling excessively and disproportionately self-satisfied with her minor environmental-friendly achievements leaves Ev feeling like improving her environmental-consciousness or associated behaviors is unnecessary. Moreover, she fails to engage in sufficiently critical self-examination, only superficially probing her credentials. Consequently, she has experienced incognizant moral decline: she unwittingly behaves worse than she did before reflecting on her good deeds.

Even if not all licensing errors lead to this sort of moral decline, the general worry is similar: licensing errors let agents break bad with a clear conscience. Agents who succumb to licensing errors often do things they shouldn't while feeling like their credentials make

those behaviors okay. The self-satisfaction they derive from their licensing error makes them complacent, if only locally, and repeated applications of these errors can cause moral decline through the development of incaution and complacency as vices. Moreover, correcting these problematic developments can be difficult, especially without the concepts of self-licensing and licensing errors in hand, because these errors breed incognizance. Viewing their bad behaviors through the lens of their credentials, they see nothing to correct. Thus, licensing errors can entrench bad behaviors by leaving self-licensors feeling no need to improve.

Just as Environmentalist-Ev's self-licensing reflection caused her incognizant moral decline, reflection constituting epistemic self-licensing can lead to incognizant epistemic decline characterized by complacency. Sometimes when an agent receives higher-order evidence of their virtue the fall from grace can be far, going all the way from virtue to vice. Consider:

> CONVERT: Imagine a truly open-minded agnostic about God's existence. Searching for answers, he participates in many religious practices and rituals and studies religion, philosophy, and theology from all sides, exposing himself to as many arguments and ideas as possible. One day, something clicks, he sees clearly that God exists, and he becomes a public intellectual sharing his findings with the world. As his story spreads, he becomes famous for having undergone a truly open-minded conversion. Taking note of this, he conceives of himself as open-minded. But little by little he becomes more closed-minded. During his Q&A sessions, audience members ask critical questions that he dismisses or otherwise fails to engage with seriously rather than answering or directly engaging with them. Having gained enough notoriety, serious intellectuals begin publishing responses to his work, but he refuses to read them, assuming they have all misunderstood his arguments. Soon enough, he labels anyone who disagrees with him, on the basis of their dissent, as unserious thinkers or undeserving of his intellectual attention. All the while, he feels secure in these behaviors because, he thinks, they're not closed-minded behaviors at all. After all, he's famously open-minded.

CONVERT illustrates the possibility of an epistemic self-licensing sorites problem, showing how epistemic decline can sneak up on reflective agents. Just as one grain of sand does not make a heap, one counter-virtuous behavior does not make vice. But vice, like a heap, can creep up on you: vicious behaviors viewed through the lens of virtuous credentials can add up to vice without the agent realizing it before it's too late. Hence, the incognizance of the epistemic decline. Moreover, just as Environmentalist-Ev was right to recycle and reduce her plastics use, our convert was right to be open-minded. Things go wrong because he rests content with his open-minded achievements using them as a fixed lens through which he views his current behaviors, rather than viewing them from an evolving

perspective. Reflecting on and licensing from his former virtue causes him to fail to maintain the quality of behavior that constituted his virtue in the first place, all the while leaving him feeling secure in that virtue. Had he not known about his virtue, he would not have experienced this epistemic decline. Acquiring higher-order evidence of virtue can lead to incognizant epistemic decline.

Recall that complacency involves lacking a felt need to *maintain* or *improve* one's credentials. The convert lacks the felt need to maintain his credentials. Acquiring higher-order evidence can also lead to complacency that involves lacking a felt need to improve. Consider our implicit bias example. The scientist refuses to opt for ignorance about identity markers, despite knowing how this evidence can distort inquiry, because he thinks his training makes him unbiased. Let's distinguish two pieces of higher-order evidence that play different roles. First, call the evidence of his credentials – that he has undergone a certain kind of training – *credential evidence*. Second, call the evidence that he's likely to misevaluate the applicants if he grants himself access to identity markers the *ameliorative evidence*. The point I want to make is that having the credential evidence causes the scientist to discount the ameliorative evidence. It's not that he has made a mistake yet in assessing his first-order evidence and now fails to heed higher-order evidence. Rather, he has reason, provided by the ameliorative evidence, to believe he *will* misevaluate his evidence if he grants himself access to certain information. However, he discounts this higher-order evidence, on the basis of his credential evidence, because he wrongly thinks his training implies that accepting this information isn't irresponsible. The scientist has become complacent. The excessive self-satisfaction he derives from his positive higher-order credential evidence makes him feel like further effort is unnecessary – he's done enough to fine-tune his evidence evaluating abilities; he can skip all this anonymizing! – so he dismisses ameliorative higher-order evidence that can prevent him from making errors.

Juxtaposing the acquisition of positive higher-order evidence with self-licensing errors enables us to see how acquiring such evidence – even fully accurate evidence – can lead to incognizant epistemic decline. It can increase complacency by removing the felt need to maintain or improve one's epistemic position. This may be what happens in some cases of epistemic trespassing. When alleged trespassers are charged with trespassing, they don't typically cop to these charges but instead double down and insist that their credentials license forays beyond their recognized domain of expertise (Cf. Ballantyne 2019). For example, when Richard Dawkins, an evolutionary biologist, addresses an epistemic trespassing charge related to his work on religion, he asks (2008: 79-80):

What expertise can theologians bring to deep cosmological questions that scientists cannot? … [T]heologians are certainly no more qualified to answer [these questions] than scientists themselves.

What matters here is not whether Dawkins is trespassing, but that his response exemplifies how people *actually* answer and counter these accusations. Rather than treating the acquisition of higher-order evidence – in this case, that one is trespassing – as providing an opportunity for epistemic improvement, the beliefs underlying the licensing that leads thinkers to stray beyond their recognized domain of expertise in the first place are recycled to discount higher-order evidence-based accusations of trespassing.

The point is not that epistemic self-licensing *must* lead to epistemic decline. Rather, it is that there are risks associated with reflection and epistemic self-licensing that we must all, individually and collectively, remain vigilant against. Not a costless antidote to our fallibility, veridical higher-order evidence can lead to incognizant epistemic decline and undermine its own ameliorative promise.

When introducing the worry about the relation between self-licensing and higher-order evidence, I emphasized that it derives not from misleading but from fully veridical higher-order evidence. After seeing the worry now, readers might be suspicious. Although *some* of the problematic reflection is *prompted* by veridical higher-order evidence, agents engaged in this reflection clearly have inaccurate and incomplete conceptions of their epistemic (and, in Ev's case, moral) situations. Though the "objective" scientist's higher-order credential evidence about his training is accurate, he mistakes the implications of that evidence, wrongly thinking it indicates his lack of bias. And while the convert rightly thinks his conversion evinces his (former) open-mindedness, he misevaluates his closed-minded behaviors as open-minded. So, while these cases contain *some* veridical higher-order evidence, they are riddled with blunders of higher-order reasoning and reflection. How does this pose a problem for the promise of higher-order evidence?

To see my answer, recall the antidote analogy from the Introduction. It was absurd for the doctor to claim she had an antidote that only worked in the absence of the conditions it was meant to treat. Similarly, it would be absurd to claim higher-order evidence is an antidote to fallibility if it only works in its absence. Again, its effectiveness as an antidote to fallibility must be measured against the conditions in which it will be administered: namely, to fallible thinkers who may systematically mishandle it. Though it can lead to

improvement, in the hands of those it will allegedly improve, it can also lead to decline. Sometimes *lacking* it is preferable to *having* it.

Epistemological "second-best" reasoning seems required here (DiPaolo 2019; Wiens 2020; Daost MS). The theory of the second best teaches us that if achieving some good requires meeting two or more conditions, sometimes meeting *none* of those conditions will be preferable to meeting *only some*. Perhaps fallible agents who would always reason perfectly with their veridical higher-order evidence should always seek out such evidence. But since fallible agents will not always meet both conditions, sometimes meeting neither may be preferable.[11] In other words, because fallible agents won't always reason perfectly with their veridical higher-order evidence, *not* seeking it out may sometimes be preferable. This doesn't mean agents should *never* reflect or that they must *always* avoid veridical higher-order evidence. After all, agents should sometimes reflect on their licensing reasoning. It only means we cannot assume that adding veridical higher-order evidence or reflection based in truth to the mix will always be preferable to avoiding it. And it means we should not let our guard down or become complacent simply because we have learned flattering truths about our epistemic selves or situations. Thus, even if all the puzzles surrounding misleading higher-order evidence get resolved in favor of the promise of higher-order evidence, we would still need to temper our optimism about its promise. It can lead to improvement, yes, but, in the hands of the very subjects it promises to help, it can also reduce its own effectiveness by leading to incognizant decline.[12]

5.2 Higher-Order Evidence & Hostility

Knowing now how positive higher-order evidence interacts with self-licensing, we are can explain how susceptibility to licensing errors generates exploitable vulnerabilities. In particular, we can uncover a form of manipulation that is the mirror image of gaslighting. Gaslighting aims to reduce its victim's self-trust to the point of losing confidence in her ability to think for herself leaving her doubting her own vision of reality. The goal of gaslighting is increased *dependence*: the gaslighter wants the victim not only to replace her vision of reality with his own, but also to prevent her from challenging his interpretations

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[11] Cf. Smithies (2016: 63) who writes, in response to worries about the actual reliability of reflection, that "for non-ideal agents like us, sometimes the best strategy for forming justified beliefs that are stable under reflection is actually not to engage in reflection at all."

[12] Several epistemologists (e.g., Kelly 2010, Feldman 2009) have argued that higher-order evidence is "just more evidence." My arguments suggest: yes and no. Yes: higher-order evidence is no magic bullet against epistemic error. No: acquiring it may have *worse* effects than other evidence.

of reality and from responding to reality independently of him (cf. Abramson 2014: 11; Spear 2019: 5). The mirror image of gaslighting, then, would involve *increasing* a subject's self-trust to the point of making him excessively confident in his own vision of reality and in his ability to think for himself. Call this form of manipulation *emboldening*. Analogously, the goal of emboldening is increased *independence*: the manipulator wants the subject to trust his own view of reality and to give him confidence to resist accepting or depending on *others'* interpretations of reality.

In an age of ever-increasing specialization, epistemic dependence is nothing to be ashamed of (Hardwig 1985, 1991; Fricker 2006). But if you're a manipulator who knows people would believe what you want them to believe if it weren't for their dependence on experts, say, you can engage in emboldening as a strategy to get them to self-license questioning the experts. How might you do this? To make people feel comfortable thinking for themselves and rejecting their higher-order evidence, you could do what's been done to accelerate science denial: Propagate and praise narratives of nonconformists, like Galileo, successfully standing up against the scientific consensus of their times. Convince people that their *lack* of training is an intellectual *virtue*. In short, inflate their self-trust and imbue them with enough confidence in their own abilities to question higher-order evidence provided by expert opinion. When you know that a population is antecedently likely to believe what you want them to believe if it weren't for their higher-order evidence, you can manipulate them into believing what you want by emboldening them to make them self-license dismissing their higher-order evidence.

Thus, we might make licensing errors ourselves or we might be encouraged to make them by others who have a stake in how we manage our intellectual endeavors. Our study of licensing errors illuminates an important class of epistemic vulnerabilities that can be exploited by hostile forces. There is overlap between my project and Nguyen's (ms) most recent work on "hostile epistemology," i.e., the study of how intellectual vulnerabilities might be exploited.[13] Nguyen links quantification with concluding inquiry by showing how the apparent clarity of using numbers acts as a thought-terminator. Because manipulators sometimes have an interest in preventing thought, Nguyen argues, they have an interest in aping clarity via misleading quantification. Preventing subjects from thinking is the goal of gaslighting as well. But we must note that manipulators who disregard or downright oppose

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[13] Recent hostile epistemology includes discussions of epistemic injustice (Fricker 2007, Medina 2013), propaganda (Stanley 2015, McKinnon 2018), gaslighting (Abramson 2014, Spear 2019), indoctrination (DiPaolo & Simpson 2016, Raimondi 2021), fake news (Rini 2017), vice (Cassam 2016, 2019; Battaly 2018), echo chambers (Nguyen 2018), prejudice (Begby 2013), and fanaticism (DiPaolo 2020b).

epistemic value also have an interest in selectively *increasing* people's tendencies to think for themselves and to resist the ameliorative power of deferring to visions of reality provided by epistemic superiors. They can achieve this aim by encouraging licensing errors that inflate people's self-trust, causing them in turn to mishandle or completely dismiss higher-order evidence that could have otherwise improved their epistemic situation.

These matters look even worse when considering the Dunning-Kruger effect. The less knowledgeable, expert, skilled, or competent a person is in a particular domain the worse he is at judging his own competence in that domain (Kruger & Dunning 1999). This means the people most likely to make mistakes in a domain are also those most likely to misevaluate, especially seriously overestimate, their credentials in that domain. Overestimating credentials can lead to licensing errors. Given what we've said about how licensing errors can cause agents to mishandle higher-order evidence, it follows that the least competent may be especially prone to mishandling higher-order evidence. This is worrisome because the least competent are the ones who *could* benefit *most* from higher-order evidence's corrective power. But they are unlikely to receive this benefit if their licensing goes unchecked or if it is manipulated by bad actors. Indeed, this may be an intellectual instance of the general facts that the least well off are the most likely to be trapped in their bad situation and the most likely targets of predatory exploitation.

Our vulnerability to licensing errors makes us vulnerable to exploitation via licensing error encouragement. Moreover, if licensing errors increase our likelihood of adopting certain beliefs or reduce the likelihood of correcting others in response to higher-order evidence, manipulators who want us to adopt or maintain these beliefs can encourage licensing errors to inoculate us against the ameliorative benefits of higher-order evidence. This hostile epistemological concern is not just that hostile forces want us to make errors. Rather, it is that encouraging licensing errors is a powerful and pernicious mechanism for manipulating minds and preventing higher-order evidence from living up to its promise.

7. Conclusion

We are imperfect believers. A pessimist might respond to this fact by dwelling on how our imperfections make us vulnerable to exploitation by manipulative forces or susceptible to falling into patterns of troubling intellectual behavior. An optimist might respond by looking for opportunities to improve our epistemic lot in life. A realist, like myself, would do both. This study of epistemic self-licensing lies at the intersection of these responses,

situated among projects in hostile epistemology, epistemic explanation, and higher-order evidence.

Our fallibility is frustrating. It prevents us from perfectly achieving our twin aims of believing the truth and avoiding error. While we may assign intrinsic value to certain patterns of true beliefs, these aims often play a more instrumental role in our lives. Many of us yearn for autonomy and freedom from manipulation, coercion, and exploitation. By opening us to error, fallibility makes us vulnerable to manipulation, thereby presenting an obstacle to achieving full autonomy. Recognizing this fact demands approaching fallibility from the perspective of hostile epistemology. Our study of self-licensing has illuminated an important class of vulnerabilities that deserve hostile epistemological treatment. Manipulators have an interest in encouraging licensing errors. Identifying our susceptibility to these errors and articulating strategies aimed at avoiding or rectifying them has the potential to reduce the effectiveness of such manipulation. Moreover, *failing* to theorize self-licensing would allow such manipulation to remain pernicious. I have tried to contribute to this unmasking process by beginning a discussion of the relationship between epistemic self-licensing and emboldening.

Explanation for the sake of intervention is the ultimate, long-term goal of this study. This project follows in the footsteps of several epistemological projects that begin by identifying troubling intellectual trends, and then do conceptual work to articulate, distinguish, and defend explanations of these phenomena. Why do people believe conspiracy theories, refuse to take vaccines, deny climate change, or get sucked into fanaticism and terrorism? Because they are intellectually vicious (Cassam 2016, 2019; Battaly 2018), in information cocoons (Hardin 2002, Sunstein 2009, Pariser 2011), fed information aimed to manufacture doubt (Oreskes & Conway 2010), trapped in echo chambers that foster distrust of outsiders (Nguyen 2018), or simply don't care enough about truth (Lackey 2018, Cassam 2019). I have pursued this type of project here, directing my attention to similarly unsavory phenomena: Why do people epistemically trespass, deny science, refuse to guard against their own biases, become overconfident in their own objectivity, conclude inquiry prematurely, develop vice, and mishandle higher-order evidence? Why do reflective, epistemically conscientious thinkers fall prey to these behaviors? One important explanation: they succumb to licensing errors.

Like many of these explanatory projects, my purposes here have been philosophical, rather than empirical. The self-licensing explanation is a *possible* explanation of the target phenomena that is novel, plausible, and unifying. However, since none of these

explanations is likely the *whole* story, the self-licensing explanation is only another piece of a very complex explanatory puzzle. Moreover, the benefits of the strategies for improvement so-far identified should not be oversold. Going much further than the strong evidentialist position discussed in the Introduction, I have identified licensing errors we must remain vigilant against and questions we can ask ourselves and others as we attempt to do so (e.g., "Do I have this credential?", "Does this credential license this behavior?", "Am I the target of 'emboldening'?" etc.). But like the interventions identified by these other thinkers, these remedies carry no guarantee of success. Indeed, our study, far from recommending an unqualified endorsement of critical self-reflection, has revealed unsettling limitations of the ameliorative effectiveness of higher-order evidence. Though I'm not prepared to abandon critical reflection, I agree with Hilary Kornblith (2014: 3) when he writes this about reflection:

> What commonsense tells us is a way of screening out beliefs in order to make them more accurate turns out, instead, in many cases, to be a route to little more than self-congratulation.

Indeed, I have argued that even if all the puzzles surrounding higher-order evidence get resolved in favor of its ameliorative promise, we still have reason to temper our optimism about this promise. Worse than mere self-congratulation, self-licensing in response to receiving higher-order evidence can contribute to incognizant epistemic decline and the development of vice. Hence, my professed realism.

Although much of our discussion, including the modest remedies so-far proposed, has focused on individuals, seeing what individuals may do when left to their own devices demands acknowledging that individuals cannot solve these problems on their own. Individualistic vigilance is required but it is not enough. We need social solutions too (cf. Rini 2017). I don't pretend to have very specific offerings here. But the implicit bias case should be a source of inspiration. Acknowledging that *others* may need to deprive themselves of certain information to avoid falling victim to implicit bias, individuals may think their *own* credentials imply that they can avoid opting for ignorance without negative incident. And sure: some individuals may be right about this. But not as many as think they are, and as Berenstain reminds us, the consequences of false positives here can entrench injustice. For this reason, institutions have structured inquiries in ways that remove the choice from individuals by requiring the omission of identifying information at various stages of evaluation. This is a case of institutions working to remedy patterns of problematic individual intellectual behavior. Similarly, institutions may be able to curb epistemic

trespassing as well. News outlets and social media companies can refuse to platform those who are not recognized as experts on a topic, or in certain extreme cases, they can deplatform especially pernicious epistemic trespassers. In cases where epistemic trespassing is particularly undesirable – e.g., public health or the legitimacy of elections – sufficiently strict guidelines about domain of expertise and the range of speakers' testimony paired with the threat of deplatforming may deter certain forms of epistemic trespassing. Unfortunately, these sorts of policies provide neither risk-free nor complete and enduring solutions. For my purposes, they merely illustrate ways problems surrounding self-licensing might be mitigated with not only individual remedies but social ones as well. Further work must be done to identify interventions – and balancing trade-offs – aimed at limiting licensing error.

The three threads of this paper – hostile epistemology, explanation and intervention, and higher-order evidence – come together in important ways. Higher-order evidence will never live up to its promise if hostile forces manipulate people into adopting strategies, like erroneous self-licensing, for disregarding that evidence. Giving higher-order evidence its best chance requires explaining how people mishandle it – on their own or encouraged by others – and identifying ameliorative strategies aimed an intervention. By now, the good news is old news: higher-order evidence can improve our epistemic situation. The bad news is that our vulnerability to licensing errors may prevent us from reaping the benefits higher-order evidence offers and may even corrupt those benefits to our own detriment. Indeed, if the Dunning-Kruger effect is to be trusted, those who most need higher-order evidence may be least likely to accept it. They may think they're, like, a very smart person.

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